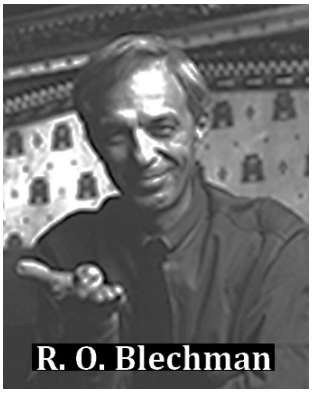
R. O. BLECHMAN IS NOT AN ANIMATOR

The subject of our dissertation was born in Brooklyn during 1930 as Robert Oscar Blechman . . . or some such variation on that theme. Wikipedia touts R. O. Blechman thusly:

> American animator, illustrator, children's-book author, graphic novelist and editorial cartoonist whose work has been the subject of retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art and other institutions. He was inducted into the Art Directors Hall of Fame in 1999.

Every word of that is true except 'animator', because R. O. Blechman is not an animator. Profiles, bios, and write-ups repeatedly claim he is. Why? It needs to be understood that while all toads are frogs, not all frogs are animators.


R. O. Blechman

His parents supported Bob Blechman's artistic leanings and he attended the High School of Music and Art, going on to Oberlin College. Upon graduating in 1952 he humped his portfolio around to advertising agencies in Manhattan. During all that, Bob wrote and illustrated a book in his parents' kitchen. Blechman hand lettered *THE JUGGLER OF OUR LADY*, knocking the whole thing out quickly. Henry Holt agreed to publish it. Uncle Sam had Private Blechman in the Army before *THE JUGGLER OF OUR LADY* saw release. Fortunately he avoided combat in the Korean War, being stationed in Asbury Park, New Jersey to do medical illustration.

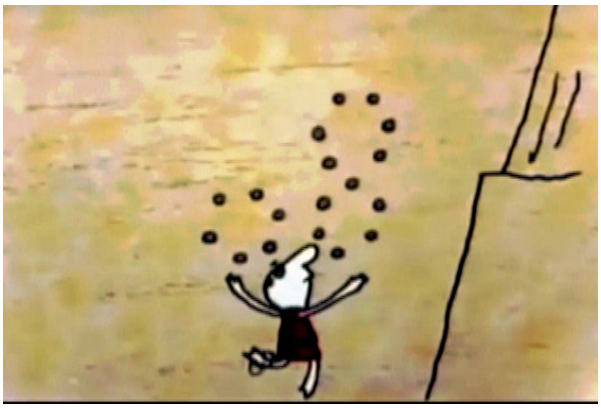
THE JUGGLER OF OUR LADY was a critical and commercial success. John Hubley admired the book's uniqueness and deep spirituality, combined with the simplicity of Blechman's graphic style. In late 1955 Hubley invited him to join Storyboard Inc.'s fledgling New York branch as a layout artist. In March of 1956 Bob Blechman joined Screen Cartoonists Guild Local 841.

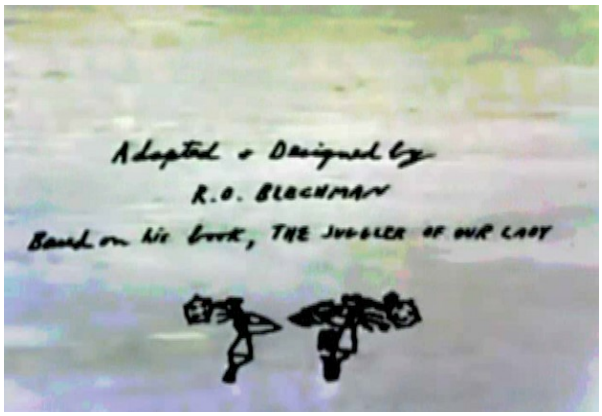
Connections were made. Gene Deitch was Blechman's supervisor at Storyboard, and they got on well. Hubley sent Blechman on assignment to Hollywood where he worked

with animator Willis Pyle. And yet, Blechman referred to his time at Storyboard as "an experiment that failed miserably". So, when Gene Deitch was put in charge at Terrytoons, Blechman warily took another turn at the business, this time as a designer, with an office next to Len Glasser.

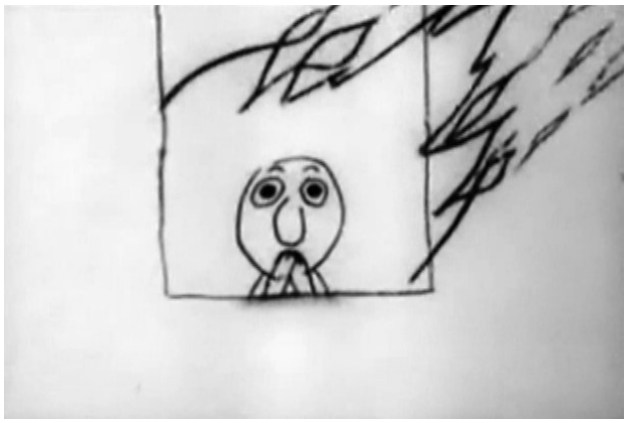
It's important to note this is a period when Terrytoons was in the midst of an internal power struggle with Deitch's faction pitted against producer Bill Weiss and his entrenched old guard. In the name of further clarity, I should relate that Bob Blechman is a soft-spoken, cosmopolitan fellow. Len Glasser claims that Blechman sometimes walked into his office to take a pencil from Glasser's desk and snap it in two, muttering something about how angry that place made him. These excessively violent outbursts surprised Glasser, because Bob Blechman is a gentleman . . . but not an animator.

Gene Deitch decided to make THE JUGGLER OF OUR LADY as a cartoon, giving it the full Cinerama treatment. Al Kouzel did the animation, because R. O. Blechman is not an animator. Released in 1957, THE JUGGLER OF OUR LADY played well at film festivals and art-house theaters. Boris Karloff's sensitive narration gave it a level of sophistication absent in most cartoons. The British Film Academy nominated it for an award.





Then Bill Weiss dropped the axe, forcing Deitch and his faction out of Terrytoons. *C'est la vie*! Blechman illustrated advertisements and sold work to different publications, mainly cartoons. ESQUIRE Magazine sent him to Yugoslavia. In 1958 Blechman did a cover for Harvey Kurtzman's Magazine HUMBUG. John Hubley released A DATE WITH DIZZY, featuring clips from several past Storyboard commercials. Bill Littlejohn had animated some sketches Blechman left behind at Storyboard.



So, John Hubley was the first to infer R. O. Blechman is an animator, which he isn't. And yet, the medium held an allure for Bob Blechman. The United Nations Association's magazine VISTA printed a story titled *THE EMPEROR'S NEW VISIT*, which intrigued Blechman enough to try his hand at directing an animated version. Willis Pyle, now in New York, ran a studio from the Abbey-Victoria Hotel. Blechman and Pyle made a film of *THE EMPEROR'S NEW VISIT*, screening it at the Aspen Design Conference when Blechman was guest speaker.

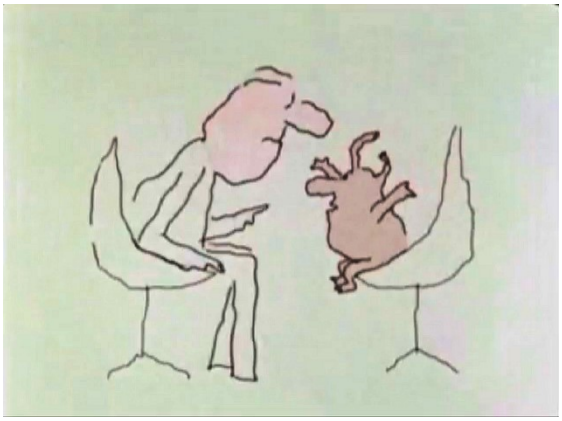
Not thrilled with the results, Blechman and Pyle none-the-less took another shwing with *THE EMPEROR'S NEW ARMOR*. The public grew more familiar with R. O. Blechman's sparse, squiggly drawing style through constant exposure in the print media. His real ambition on that front was to do a cover for *THE NEW YORKER Magazine*, but no luck so far. He did some layouts and design work for Elektra Films, a studio noted for innovative TV commercials.

Elektra paired Blechman with different animators for different projects. Phil Kimmelman found himself in a room with Blechman for one project. Blechman drew a few samples in his signature style and left Kimmelman alone to practice simulating it. When Blechman returned he picked out a sketch from those scattered across the table. Blechman critiqued the piece, telling Kimmelman he missed the mark, expressing doubts that this could work. Kimmelman pointed out that Blechman was holding one of Blechman's own sketches. They both laughed and got along fine after that.

Shamus Culhane met with Blechman in 1966 about Paramount Cartoons adapting some of Blechman's material, but it never occurred. That year R. O. Blechman plugged into the cultural *zeitgeist* (or should I say *linguee*?), with the heart-warming interstitial *CHRISTMAS BIRDS* for the CBS Network.

Willis Pyle animated this piece. Birds sing in a fir tree as snow falls gently around them. They stop when a man carrying a saw approaches. The man halts to play *GOD REST YE MERRY GENTLEMEN* on the saw*. CHRISTMAS BIRDS* is truly a tiding of peace and joy.

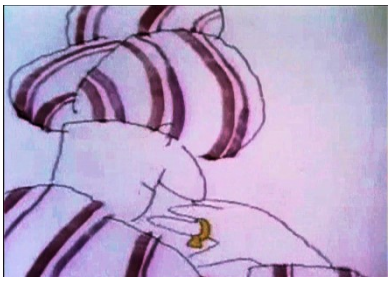
A high-profile Alka-Seltzer commercial designed by Blechman for Elektra Films in 1967 pushed him farther into the cultural limelight. Jack Dazzo animated the spot, where a narrator mediates an argument between a man and his stomach, which is understandably upset.



R. O. Blechman won Best Animation Design at the Clio Awards for *STOMACH TALK*, and took home that same award the next year for a Volvo commercial called *ATTACK OF THE CAR DOGS* he did with Pelican Films.

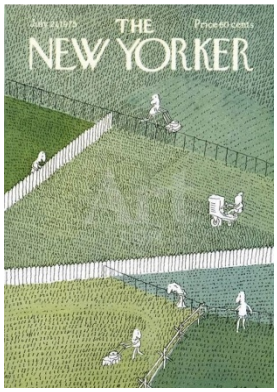
Blechman's magazine illustration career continued as he collaborated on teleblurbs with Elektra. At that time New York City was the Mecca of cutting edge animation. Work might sometimes be scarce, but it was seldom boring. Sure an animator could always go to Hollywood and pick up a regular check on the assembly line at Hanna-Barbera or DePatie

Frelebg – but R. O. Blechman is not an animator, as I believe I've pointed out. He threw his hat into the whirlpool ring of Lee Savage, Lars Calonius, Faith and John Hubley, Fred Mogubgub, Ray Favata, Kim & Gifford, Pablo Ferro . . . a bubbling, volcanic, seismic cauldron of creative energy tearing through the seams of television advertisement, fueled and funded by corporate dollars encouraging experimentation. Blechman worked exclusively with Elektra Films in this venue.



R. O. Blechman teamed up with folk-music icon Pete Seeger on *ABRAHAM & ISAAC*, made for the PBS show *THE GREAT AMERICAN DREAM MACHINE* in 1971. Rod McCall was an architect turned animator of *SESAME STREET* segments. He did some animation for *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE*, went into advertising and won some CLIO Awards. Finally settling into being a writer/director/producer of independent films.

R. O. Blechman was too much a New Yorker to ply his trade elsewhere. Blechman taught illustration in Manhattan at the School of Visual Arts. He married Moisha Kubinyi, daughter of noted painters Doris Hall and Kálmán Kubinyi. Blechman tutored his kids in French at the dinner table. All in all, an articulate minor celebrity welcome at any cocktail party worth attending. But, of course . . . NOT an animator.



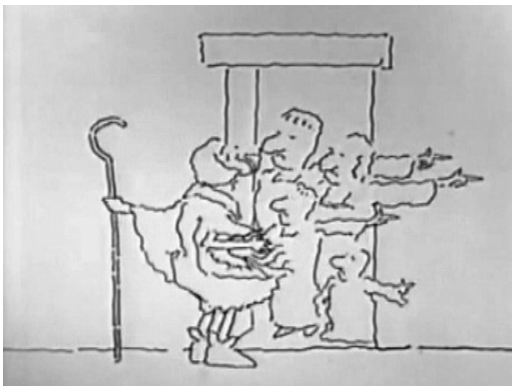
Why! Why would these accusations of being an animator dog R. O. Blechman through the decades? Certainly his choice to throw full creative weight behind the medium plays a large role. Elektra Films had burned bright and fast, being gone by the end of 1974. By then, R. O. Blechman counted twenty years as a working artist, successful practically before he even got started. Now, it seemed like he was just warming up. In 1975 Blechman bagged his long-sought prize with a cover of *THE NEW YORKER*.

His name turns up on a 1976 list of studios *Back Stage* published. Sunlight Pictures, at 322 East 39th Street, advertised as 'Animated productions'. The ad says the person to contact was Sol Dworkin. This guy Sol Dworkow had been around since the Du Mont Network, starting out there as chief editor in the transcription department. Du Mont struggled against increasing competition. By 1954 Sol Dworkow was producing teleblurbs at the ad agency Biow-Biern-Toigo. Moving up in 1963 he was promoted to Vice President

in Charge of Televison Commercial Production at Benton & Bowles. Dworkow and Karl Fischer won a 1972 CLIO Award for Schaefer Beer spot. Ridley Scott was Director and Cameraman on that.

Having attained success at so many goals, what to do next? If any one of you guessed - "produce an hour length PBS animated Christmas special" – well, you win! Blechman organized a Christmas special for the Public Broadcasting System called *SIMPLE GIFTS*, which meant assembling a crew. Blechman chose Michael Sporn as his assistant director and production manager. Sporn had recently been with the Hubleys under the wing of master animator Tissa David. She tackled a *SIMPLE GIFTS* sequence inspired by Virginia Woolf. The whole film was very classy. Children's author Maurice Sendak wrote part of it.

Financed with PBS money, Ida Greenberg signed on to supervise Blechman's Ink & Paint Department. Ida Greenberg went all the way back to Fleischer Studios' Miami interlude. She'd done I&P for M-G-M in the Forties. Shamus Culhane had Ida Greenberg at Paramount Cartoons running I&P in the Sixties. She plied her trade at Pelican Films, and for Hubley Studios, working alongside Michael Sporn and Tissa David.

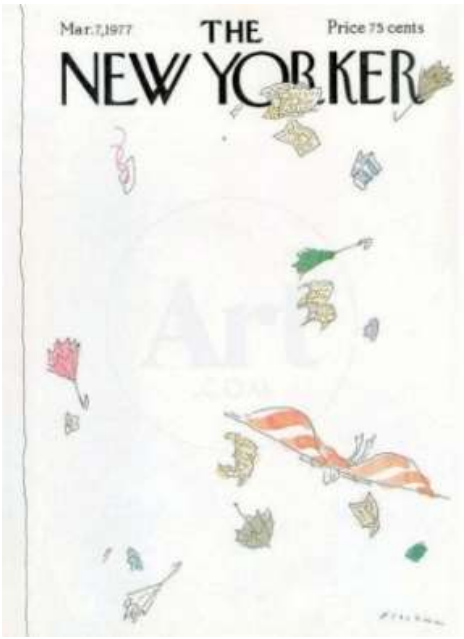


Blechman directed Ed Smith and Lu Guarner on a sequence called *NO ROOM AT THE INN.* Jack Dazzo worked seven days on it.

Lu Guarnier got his start with Leon Schlesinger Productions drawing Porky Pig for Bob Clampett cartoons. Guarnier was one of the first men drafted into the Army Signal Corps' animation unit in Astoria, Queens. After the war Guarnier remained east, making himself valuable at Film Graphics. He served a few terms as president of the SCG local. U.P.A. put Lu Guarnier in charge of layouts. Hubley Studios engaged him for several films. Total Television let Guarnier direct episodes of *KING LEONARDO AND HIS SHORT SUBJECTS.*

Guarnier had been at it for more than a decade before Edwin Smith began pushing a pencil at Shamus Culhane Productions, then for Film Graphics, going on to become a fixture at Pelican Films. Ed Smith, for fifteen years editor of the union's Top Cel newsletter, also did some stuff with Hubley Studios. Smith was cocksure and fast paced.

Surrounded by capable professionals, Bob Blechman was able to pursue illustration. 1977 turned out to be a banner year, with two *THE NEW YORKER* covers.



SIMPLE GIFTS aired in December 1977. Public reaction proved favorable. Escalating R. O. Blechman's stock as a desirable dinner guest.

Hesitant to break up such a talented crew, R. O. Blechman formed an animation studio called The Ink Tank at 2 West 47th Street. Ida Greenberg was made supervisor of the Checking Department. Blechman could no longer be in the Screen Cartoonists Guild, as he had become management. Union Business Agent Pepe Ruiz morphed from representing Blechman to a thorn in his side. The Ink Tank turned out segments for *SESAME STREET*. Television ads helped pay the bills. Blechman chose the location mainly for the luxurios office, where he mostly stayed while production proceeded on a lower floor.

The Ink Tank was free to focus on profits from teleblurbs. Bob and Moisha went to a documentary filmmakers' conference in Milan, Italy, bringing about a chance encounter with a top PBS executive who'd appreciated *SIMPLE GIFTS*. Before Bob Blechman got done talking he'd planted the idea of producing a one hour animated version of Stravinsky's opera *THE SOLDIER'S TALE*. I'd be remiss not to point out that even though R. O. Blechman may not be an animator, in that shining moment he truly exhibited the masochistic tendencies of one.

Committing to make a feature-length animation is a form of indentured servitude, a dance with the devil in all the details. Those details were looked after by the Checking Department, which, at The Ink Tank was heavy with seasoned I&P pros. With Ida Greenberg was pedantical Sydel Solomon, old-school Fleischer Studios hand from the Thirties, M-G-M, Cineffects, Tempo Productions, Ben Harrison Productions, Shamus Culhane Productions, Archer Productions, Bill Sturm Studios, Lars Calonius Productions, Storyboard, Stars & Stripes Productions Forever, and a few other shops while freelancing. Sydel Solomon was as real as the deal got, and quick to tell you so too.

Selby Kelly, widow of Pogo cartoonist Walt Kelly, joined Ida and Sydel in Checking. Selby Daley, as she was once known, slung ink and paint at Disney for a decade before leaving during the big strike, moving through M-G-M, Lantz, Warner Brothers, and Hanna-Barbera. She did layouts for The Eames Office short *THE EXPANDING AIRPORT* concerning Washington D.C. Selby supervised checking for Sketchbook Film Productions and the U.S. State Department on *THE GREAT RIGHTS*. She earned an animation credit on Fine Arts Films' feature *SHINBONE ALLEY*.

Rounding out this highly capable checking department was Irene Cerdas, who started inking at Terrytoons right out of high school, then on to Famous Studios and Zander's Animation Parlour. Having Michael Sporn and these capable ladies overseeing production on *THE SOLDIER'S TALE* freed Blechman up to illustrate, take meetings, design teleblurbs, sign paychecks, and try to figure out where money would come from to finance this feature film. Pepe Ruiz snapped at The Ink Tank's heels over any perceived violation of union regulations, even shutting the place down briefly.

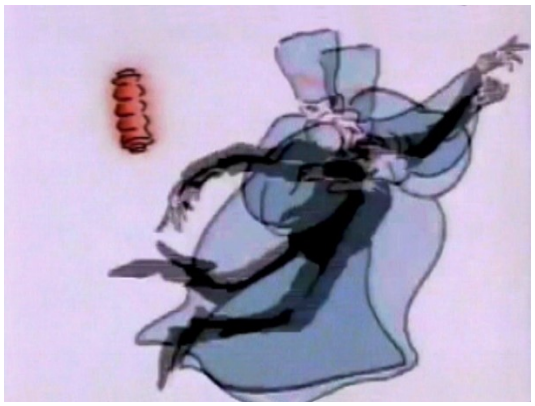
Blechman persevered. His wife Moisha acted as a color coordinator on the movie. Production spanned five years. Budgetary restraints prevented Bob from keeping any

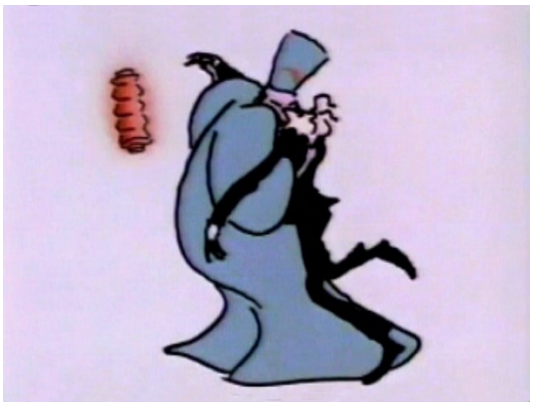
animator on *THE SOLDIER'S TALE* for very long, so work progressed in fits and starts. Bill Littlejohn did some animation. His experience stretched back to 1934 at Van Beuren Studios. Then on to M-G-M, Fine Arts Films, Hubley Studios. Littlejohn was a past president of the Hollywood union local. He was with Jay Ward Productions, and Bill Melendez on the Peanuts specials, and Crossbow Productions for a Carl Reiner/Mel Brooks project.

Ed Smith chipped in. Among the scenes he contributed was a balletic snow storm.

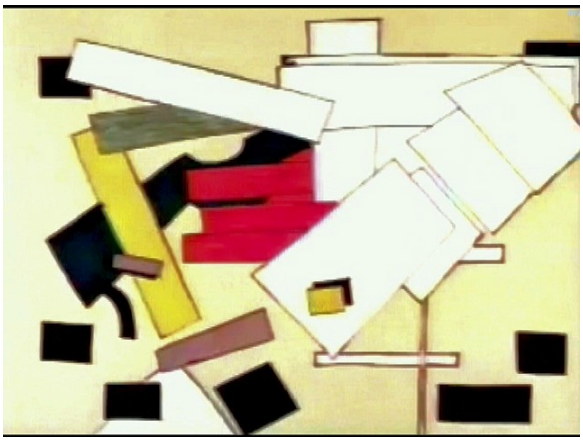
Fred Burns was a favored animator at Hubley Studios. John R. Gaug had worked for Richard Williams as well as Atkinson Film Arts in Ottawa, you know, the Care Bears people. Janet Perlman, a highly respected animator-writer–director with the National Film Board of Canada did the dreamlike silent movie sequence

Tissa David did some elegant sequences on *THE SOLDIER'S TALE*, surprising Blechman with her surreal rendition of the Tango.





A younger group of animators mixed in. Tony Eastman, son of Disney and U.P.A. layout artist Phil Eastman among them. Yvette Kaplan had animated for the company that created SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK. Philadelphia born Dean Yeagle already had eight years in with Jack Zander. Maciek Albrecht entered the business on this film and found a home at The Ink Tank. And, of course, there was the inimitable Fred Mogubgub, whose unapologetically abstract flourishes added the proper nuance of absurdity.

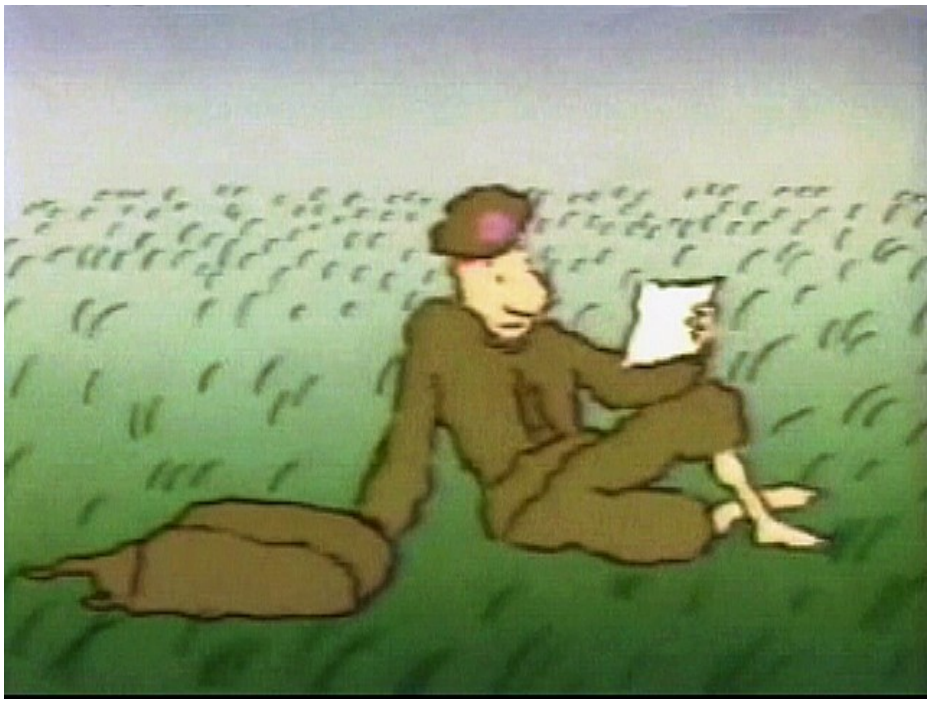


The assistant animators were no less impressive. Ed Cerullo had started in 1956 at Famous Studios, freelancing at Storyboard. Cerullo was with Pelican films in 1966 for *THE NOSE*, following Zander to the Animation Parlour for *GNOMES.* Helen Komar brought a solid *resume* – kicking it off at Famous Studios as an Assistant Animator. At Warner Brothers for *THE INCREDIBLE MR. LIMPETT*, and with Ralph Bakshi on *FRITZ THE CAT*. Komar managed animation for the Hubleys, proving good enough to rank as Assistant Animator for Richard Williams. Mary Szilagyl was an inbetweener for Richard Williams, and Assistant Animator for Perpetual Motion Pictures before diving into The Ink Tank.

They were all part of undertaking that fabulous task. Adapting Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's 1918 stage piece *L'Histoire du Soldat* into a modernized cartoon movie for an audience of Americans to watch in the early 1980s just sounds hard. Imagine actually trying it!

Like Washington at Valley Forge, R. O. Blechman kept . . . **Wait!** That's the wrong metaphor. I'm drifting away from my point, which is that R. O. Blechman is not an animator. Not so much as an assistant animator. Not even an inbetweener. What he is – is a respected

author and illustrator, layout artist, designer, producer, and screenwriter, who directed one of the finest animated feature films of the Twentieth Century. I'm not laying it on too thick. *THE SOLDIER'S TALE* is that rare combination of intelligent and entertaining. Letting it fade into obscurity would be a shame and a loss.



The Ink Tank continued making TV commercials until 2004. The studio's last big project was a 20 episode run on the stop-motion show called *I Spy* in conjunction with Scholastic Productions at 555 Broadway. *I Spy* aired on Nick Jr. Blechman acted as Creative Director, with Richard O'Connor as Animation Producer for The Ink Tank. O'Connor left in 2003 to found Asterisk! at 145 West 28th Street with Brian O'Connell. Asterisk! Dissolved in 2011 and Richard O'Conner went on to found Ace & Son.

As for R. O. Blechman not being an animator, well, with all the aforementioned taken into consideration, it might be nice if you real animators bestowed an honorary degree upon him.

. . . I'm just saying